

**** Note:** This interview contains language which some may find offensive. ******

A: I received my first notice from the Newton Draft Board when I was in Normandy. The reason for that was that I was at Brown when I enlisted, and therefore I enlisted in Providence, Rhode Island. The Newton Draft Board had no record of where I was, anything about it, but when my draft number came up they forwarded it to about eight different places and I got my notice from them in Normandy. The first question from the Newton Draft Board was, "What is your present location?" I put, "Somewhere in France." Then I wrote across the rest of it, "Please come and get me." I never heard from the Newton Draft Board again. That's one of my little stories.

__: That's surprising that they didn't come and get you and haul you out of there for being a wiseacre.

A: Well, I don't know. I have never met anyone from the Newton Draft Board. I don't even know where--They must have been located at City Hall. I don't know.

__: One would imagine, yeah.

A: Now let me tell you about City Hall. When I was a little kid, City Hall, where City Hall is right now was one big swamp, and there was a streetcar that ran from Lake Street Commonwealth, right near Boston College, all the way to Norumbega up the center of Commonwealth Avenue. And that was--we didn't have any buses in those days. And I can remember that the streetcar started in downtown Boston and the people from downtown Boston would go to Norumbega for a summer holiday and they would go out to the river and they would swim and whatever else.

When I was in high school, we went to Norumbega because it was the place to go, they had all the big bands in America, Glenn Miller played there, Harry James played. These names mean nothing to any of you, but they were the big bands, the big bands of our time. And of course what was well-known in Newton for miles around was the Totem Pole Ballroom and the Totem Pole Ballroom was where all the young kids, seniors in high school and juniors and freshman in college around Boston, would go on a Saturday night, and that's where the big bands played.

You must have some questions.

Q: Yes. Do you guys want me to start with this?

[Side remarks]

Q: Good afternoon. Today is March 1st, 2016. My name is Laura Marks and I am here at Newton City Hall with Richard Silverman. Together we are participating in Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. I know that you kind of touched on this a little bit, but what exactly were you doing before you entered the service?

A: I was at Brown University. I had started Brown in the fall of 1941. I went to Brown directly from Newton High School, and of course there was only one Newton High School in those days. There were eight of us that went from Newton High together to Brown. Getting into an Ivy League school even in those days was very difficult. Eight of us went to Brown, eight went to Harvard, six went to Yale. I knew every one of these guys, that's how I remember the numbers. However, the large groups went to three colleges in the Boston area: Northeastern, Boston College, and Boston University. There were probably 150 students that went to each of those schools from our graduating class from Newton High School. Otherwise, as far as West Coast, nobody went to a West Coast college from here. Most everybody went to New England colleges

or some went, some went as far south as the University of Pennsylvania, that far south. Nobody went to a Florida school or any other schools around there.

Q: What were you studying at Brown?

A: I had my, I could have had my degree in either English or Economics. I think that I did get my degree in Economics, but I had enough subjects in either one to give me a degree in that. Oh, I went through, now I went through four years of Brown in two years, two calendar years. The way that we did that is that I started in the fall of '41, I enlisted in the fall of '42, I came back in February or March of 1946 and I graduated in June of '47.

Q: Wow. So, where exactly did you serve?

A: Well, I was in the army pretty close to three years, which two years were in Europe. I landed in Normandy on D-plus eight and I went all the way across France, and when the war ended I was in southern Germany.

Q: Do you remember what it was like when you first arrived?

A: First arrived where?

Q: In Europe.

A: I sure do. I can remember all of that as if it was yesterday, and I can't remember where I was yesterday. You'll find in talking to older people this is generally true, their memories fail them, but things that happened to us 60 or 70 years ago we remember vividly. Here when we landed in Normandy, D-plus eight, they were several miles inland, there wasn't even any fighting going on there, but it was still pretty exciting. We were on a flat bottom barge and the barge pulled up to

the beach until it scraped the bottom, and then we all jumped off and waded in the rest of the--to the beach. When we got to the beach, the Captain called us all together and...just to roll call, and we were missing one man. That was our first casualty. Wading in, one of our guys had drowned and no one even saw him going. They found his body a couple of days later. So, that was pretty sad. No enemy fire, he just went under.

We were, of course we were--we had a lot to carry in. We had a backfield pack, we had our rifles. Something that we had that no one remembers to this day is gas masks. We were very much afraid that the Germans were going to use gas and they never did. So, we had a gas mask strapped across our chest and we feel that Russ Peters, who was the boy that was drowned, we feel that it was because of his gas mask, we just surmised that in wading in he had stepped into a shell hole and in stepping in he lost his footing and he threw his arms up like that, and the gas mask strap came up and cut off his windpipe.

I will tell you another funny story that happened to me in Normandy. We had been in Normandy a few weeks and I was a Staff Sergeant, and the Captain called me to his tent, and he said, "Sergeant, we're having an absentee election in the States for the President. The two candidates are Franklin D. Roosevelt and a guy named Dewey. And I want you to hand out the ballots to your men, have them fill them out, and bring them back to me." So he gave me about 25 ballots. I brought the ballots back to the Captain and we checked off each name. The Captain said, "Sergeant, where is your ballot? I noticed that you didn't make out a ballot." I said, "No, sir, I didn't vote." "You didn't vote? What the hell kind of patriotic American are you? You didn't vote in a Presidential election. Would you mind telling me a personal question?" I said, "No, sir." He said, "Why didn't you vote?" I said, "Sir, I'm not old enough." In those days you had to be 21 to vote. They hadn't lowered it to 18.

Here I had guys under me that were old men, they were 36 years old, which was very old to be in the army in those days, and I was a 19, 20 year old kid. What other questions can I answer?

Oh, this is interesting. When the war ended we were, as I told you, we were in southern Germany, and the government had a program at that time called I and E. It's amazing how I remember these initials and programs. Anyone who was in the army who had enlisted from college could go to a university in Europe at government expense. And I qualified, and I went to the Sorbonne. So I left Germany for a while and I went back to Paris to the Sorbonne, which was a great experience for me.

Q: Can you tell us why it was a great experience?

A: Well, I was at one of the leading universities in the world, and at that time the French loved us. A year later that was not true. Every night we were invited to French homes for dinner, we were invited to French institutions for cocktail parties, we were big heroes then. We were the first Americans back at the Sorbonne and we were very much beloved by the French people. So, here I was at a university, one of the greatest universities in the world during the daytime, and at night we had fantastic social experiences.

Q: Do you recall the day your service ended?

A: I sure do. You were sent home by the number of points you had. The U.S. government gave you one point for every month you were in the service. They gave you one additional point for every month that you served overseas. They served you--they gave you five points for every medal and five points for every battle star. And what really pushed me up in points, there weren't that many medals that were given out, but what pushed me up in points was that I had five battle stars, so I had 25 extra points and that was great.

I happened to be at the Sorbonne when my number came up, because I was near the top in our outfit as far as points go, and they said to me, "You can come back to Germany, go back to the

States, and with the next shipment and be discharged, or stay at the Sorbonne and finish the course,” which meant that I would have to stay at the Sorbonne an extra six months. One of the biggest mistakes I ever made was coming home immediately, because I would never have that experience again. But I hadn’t seen my family for over two years, so I went back to Germany and I came home.

We were piled into cattle cars and sent to, they called them cigarette camps around Le Havre. The reason they were named cigarette camps is that each camp had the name of an American top brand of cigarettes. I was sent to Camp Lucky Strike which was two miles outside of Le Havre, and you were processed there with all your papers and then they piled you into a truck and sent you to the ship that was to take you home. And once we got onboard ship our ship was one vast gambling casino. 24 hours a day you either shot crap or you played poker. The lights went out at 9:00 at night, but the latrine lights were on 24 hours a day. So, the latrines were full of soldiers shooting crap.

I can remember these experiences now, now. Everyone that got on that boat was rich and I mean in those days rich. We had not been paid for three months and we received three months’ pay in cash before we got onboard the ship. In addition to that we had been in Germany and the black market prices for everything in Germany were unbelievable. In prices of those days a carton of cigarettes sold on the black market for \$750 dollars. If you can imagine what that would be in today’s dollars, \$750 dollars. So, no one got onboard ship with less than \$4,000 or \$5,000 dollars in cash, and that was a lot of money.

So, I was a big poker player and by the time we got to Boston there were probably 50 guys onboard the ship that had all the money and everybody else was broke. Fortunately I was one of those that had a lot of money. I probably had about \$10,000 or \$12,000 dollars in cash, which was a lot of money. And I was playing poker and over the loudspeaker system--Oh, at that time I was a Corporal, I had been broken in rank from Sergeant to Private, which is in my book,

another story I'll tell you all of you if you're interested--"Corporeal Richard Silverman, please report to the top deck." Top deck? Top deck is only for Officers. What did I do? I mean all I've been doing is playing cards.

So I went up to the top deck and the Captain came to me, "You Corporal Richard Silverman?" I said, "Yes, sir, I am." He said, "There are people standing on the pier over there that have been paging you with the loudspeaker." And I could see six people standing on the pier. The distance was so far I couldn't make out who they were. Two of them were my mother and father. Two of them were people that owned the Boston Fish Pier that were friends of my mother's and father's at that time. And I had written them from Camp Lucky Strike what ship I was coming in on and they were able to check with the military and find out, they found out that ship was coming into Boston and the date that it was to arrive, and they were on the pier to greet me. However, we waved from a distance, they told me who they were on the speaker, but I never got to see them. We went from there to Fort Devens and from Devens I was discharged.

I'll tell you another. I have nothing but amazing stories to tell you. I went with, I enlisted with a bunch of guys from Brown. Brown in those days had 1500 students total. Today Brown has 1500 just in the freshman class. Of 1500 students at Brown in those days there were two Black guys, both of them football players. One of them enlisted with me, Charlie Bentley, wonderful guy. Charlie and I were standing, we're still in civilian clothes, but standing beside our bunks in the barracks at Fort Devens, and a big burly Sergeant, southern of course, came into the barracks, and he goes up to the Charlie and he says, "Nigger, what you doing in a White man's barracks?" And Charlie--we were all so startled we didn't know what to do or what to say, and Charlie says, "Well, I'm part of the Brown University group. We all came in together." He says, "I don't know what group you belong to, but you pick up your gear and you follow me to the nigger's section of this camp." And that's the last we saw of Charlie Bentley. Isn't that a terrible story?

Now, I'm still in civilian clothes. "Private Richard Silverman, report to the orderly room please." I report to the orderly room. He says, there's a Lieutenant there, he says, "Private, do you know Colonel Lovell?" "Colonel Lovell? No. Who is Colonel Lovell?" "Colonel Lovell is the Base Commander at Fort Devens and he wants to see you." What in the world did I ever do now? I couldn't figure it out. They took me to a quartermaster tent. They put a uniform on me. They brought me to the headquarters of Fort Devens. Lieutenant says, "Do you know Colonel Lovell?" I say, "No." He says, "Well, he wants to see you personally." I said, "What do I do when I see a Colonel?" He said, "Oh my god, that's right, you don't know how to salute." I said, "No." He showed me how to salute. He said, "When you're called in to his office you stand at attention in front of his desk, you salute him, and you say, 'Private Richard Silverman reporting, sir,' and then he will tell you what to do."

I sat outside for five minutes. Lieutenant says, "The Colonel will see you now," takes me into his office, tremendous office, corner office. Behind this desk is a little guy with a bald head, head is down, he is thumbing through papers. I didn't know what to do. I went over and I stood in front of his desk and I said, "Private Richard Silverman reporting, sir." Nothing, absolutely nothing. Then he says, "Sit down, Dick." I sat in the chair and he says, "You and I have a personal friend who is interested in your military career. What branch of the service would you like to be in?" I said, "I want to fly. I'd like to be in the Air Corps." "Okay. Where do you want to take your basic training?" I said, "I don't know. What choices have I got?" He said, "The two big places for basic training in the Air Corps are Miami Beach and Atlantic City. I suggest Atlantic City. You ought to go there this time of year." I said, "Okay fine." He says, "Your convoy will be leaving for Atlantic City the day after tomorrow." I said, "Great, sir. That's wonderful." I said, "Can you tell me who our mutual friend is?" He said, "No, I'm sorry, I can't." Okay.

So, I left his office. They take me back to the quartermaster tent. They take my uniform off. They put me back in civilian clothes. I go back to the barracks. All my Brown friends cluster around me, "Where the hell were you? What happened?" I said, "If I told you the story you would never

believe it.” And I’m thinking to myself, “How would anyone I know, anyone that anyone I know of that would know Colonel Lovell, the Base Commanding Officer of Devens?” Then, boom, my mother’s brother was a Major in World War One and when he came back from France he spent two or three months at Fort Devens before he was discharged, and that’s where these guys apparently became good friends.

I immediately went to a telephone. I’m still in civilian clothes. I put my nickel in, dialed, get my uncle on the phone. I said, “Leon, do you know a Colonel Lovell?” “Colonel Lovell?” I said, “Yeah.” He says, “Never heard of him.” I said, “Weren’t you at Fort Devens after the end of World War One?” He said, “Of course, I told you the whole story.” I said, “That’s what I thought. And you don’t know Colonel Lovell?” He said, “Never heard of him.” He said, “I’m busy. I can’t talk to you now.” He says, “By the way, boy, have a good time at Atlantic City.”

Aren’t those good stories? I think I put them in my book. I wrote that book so long ago that I really don’t remember what is in it. But some of these stories come to me now that I had forgotten about before.

There is one particular story that I don’t think is in the book, and I don’t remember. How much time have we got?

__: Coming close here.

[Side remarks]

__: We’ve got 15 more minutes.

A: Okay. Now, what did I do in the army? I was not a combat infantryman. I was in the Air Corps, but I was in an Air Corps Communications outfit so that we were with the infantry. I was

a cryptographer, so I worked with a radio operator and a Jeep driver and we were a mobile team. We went up and down the sector that we were assigned to, and we found out where the front lines were and we would put a message in code and send it back. I was with the 9th Air Force. We would send it back to the 9th Air Force and we would say the bomb line for today is grid section so-and-so and so-and-so, and then we made sure that the 9th Air Force didn't strike and bomb our own lines.

So, that was number one function. Number two, when I was in England before I went to France I learned how to break the German codes, and I could break every message that a German pilot sent to his air base or an air base in Stuttgart sent to Berlin, all in code, I could break it, and within five minutes everybody in the 9th Air Force knew the intelligence that the Germans sent out. And no one has any idea how much this helped us win the war. We were credited with shooting down several hundred German planes, because we would get a message, "2 ME-109's will be leaving Stuttgart at 9:00 tomorrow morning and they will be making a bombing run over such and such a section," in Belgium or France or wherever. We immediately sent that information to the 9th Air Force, and the 9th Air Force intercepted them. They knew their flight plan. They knew the exact--where they were going, and when they were going to arrive there, and they hit them from above. So, this was my job in the army.

The war was almost over. We were in southern Germany. The Germans, the German army still had not surrendered, and our team was moving from one small German town to another. We were still intercepting and still sending out messages. And when we would go through a small German town you never saw a German. They would all be behind closed doors and they would, they hung white bedsheets out the windows, which meant that the town surrendered. We got to this small town, all the white bedsheets are hanging out the windows. We pulled into the main square and in every German small town they were similar, the main square was a fountain. They had no plumbing in those days, so everybody, if you wanted water, you went to the fountain, and then you got your water. We went to the fountain to fill up our canteens and we were standing by

the fountain, and we were surrounded by the buildings with all the white bedsheets hanging up, and suddenly *ping!* a bullet bounces off the hood of our Jeep.

And we ducked down and looked up at a window and we saw the muzzle of a German rifle sticking out the window. And I said to Jack, my radio operator, I said, “Jack, come on, let’s go get him.” We were very, very gung-ho. The war was almost over. I said to the driver, “Bill, you duck behind the Jeep.” And *ping!* another bullet smashes the windshield of the Jeep. Jack and I duck down. We went around to the front of the building. The door was unlocked. We climbed four flights of stairs, go to the corner where we figure whoever it was was shooting at us. We both had our rifles drawn. We kicked open the door fast, and lying on his stomach with the rifle out the window is a 10 year old boy.

I mean I thought he was 10. We never, we didn’t speak German, so we never found out if he was 10 or 12 or 11 or whatever, but I say 10 in the story. And we screamed, “Surrender.” And he turned around and he threw up his arms and threw down the rifle on the floor. And I went over to him. He was in civilian clothes, shorts and like a t-shirt, and he had an armband on, and on the armband there was a big swastika, and it said *Deutscher Volkssturm Wehrmacht*. Any of you speak German? That means “German People’s Army”. Towards the end of the war Hitler drafted all of the young kids and the old men into the German army, but they didn’t have uniforms for them. He had plenty of guns, so he gave them each a rifle and he gave them each an armband to wear so that it said *Deutscher Volkssturm Wehrmacht*. They were part of the German People’s Army. And that’s another story.

At any rate, everybody says, “What did you do with him?” We told him to go home. We let him go. Jack kept his rifle as a souvenir, my buddy, and I kept the armband. I’ve got the armband at home.

Q: So it looks like our time is just about up. What is one more thing that you would like people a hundred years from now to know about your time in the service?

A: Gee that's hard to say. Well, it was certainly the most exciting years of my life, and I think that it's an experience that I don't want to say that every young man should have, because it isn't, and I was one of the lucky ones, I'm still alive and a lot of my friends are not, so it's something that I went through that I'll never forget. And I can still tell you stories, as I've told a couple of them today, that seem as if they happened to me five minutes ago. But I hope that some of you get a chance to read the book, because there are some other interesting ones in there.

I came back to Brown. I graduated in '47. I went into the family business. I eventually became President of our company and about 35 years ago I sold the company to a Dutch company, and that's my story. And otherwise I have lived in Newton my entire life.

Q: Thank you so much for taking time to do this with us. We are really happy to be able to include you in Newton Talks Oral History Project.

END OF INTERVIEW